

Winter Weather Safety Tips

Many injuries occur each winter as people try to keep their homes warm and get around in cold, stormy weather. December, January and February are the leading months for home fires and associated deaths in the United States. Heating equipment is the second leading cause of home-fire deaths in the United States and the leading cause during December and January. Each year, more than 700 people die of hypothermia (low body temperature) caused by extended exposure to cold temperatures both indoors and out. About half of these deaths are among persons age 65 and older; men in this age group are more likely than women to die from hypothermia.

Know Your Winter Storm and Extreme Cold Terms:

Freezing Rain: Rain that freezes when it hits the ground, creating a coating of ice on the roads, walkways, trees and power lines.

Sleet: Rain that turns to ice pellets before reaching the ground. Sleet also causes moisture on roads to freeze and become slippery.

Winter Storm Watch: A winter storm is possible in your area.

Winter Storm Warning: A winter storm is occurring or will soon occur in your area.

Blizzard Warning: Sustained winds or frequent gusts to 35 mph or greater and considerable amounts of falling or blowing snow (reducing visibility to less than a quarter mile) are expected to prevail for a period of three hours or longer.

Frost/Freeze Warning: Below freezing temperatures are expected.

You should have the following supplies in your disaster supply kit:

- Rock Salt to melt ice on walkways
- Sand to improve traction
- Snow shovels and other snow removal equipment

Prepare your Home and Family:

Prepare for possible isolation in your home by having sufficient heating fuel; regular fuel sources may be cut off. For example, store a good supply of dry, seasoned wood for your fireplace or wood-burning stove.

Winterize your home to extend the life of your fuel supply by insulating walls and attics, caulking and weather-stripping doors and windows, and installing storm windows or covering windows with plastic.

Winterize your house, shed or any other structure that may provide shelter for your family, neighbors, or equipment. Clear rain gutters, repair roof leaks and cut away tree branches that could fall on a house or other structure during a storm.

Insulate pipes with insulation or newspapers and plastic and allow faucets to drip a little during cold weather to avoid freezing.

Keep fire extinguishers on hand, and make sure everyone in your house knows how to use them. House fires pose an additional risk, as more people turn to alternate heating sources without taking the necessary safety precautions.

Portable Space Heaters – more home fires are started by heating equipment than any other cause. Portable and electric heaters are the most dangerous. But it is possible to be warm and safe this winter by following these tips on space heaters:

- Make sure your heater has been tested for safety.
- Space heaters need to have plenty of space around them.
- Place space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can burn – including furniture, people, pets and curtains.
- There should always be an adult in the room when a space heater is on. Turn off the space heaters before leaving a room or going to sleep.
- Supervise children and pets at all times when a portable space heater is in use.
- Never use space heaters to dry clothing or blankets.

Fireplaces and Wood Stoves:

- Burn only seasonal hardwood like oak, ash or maple. Do not burn trash, cardboard boxes or Christmas trees because these items burn unevenly, and may contain poisons or cause a home fire.
- Have a professional chimney sweep inspect chimneys every year. They will fix any cracks, blockages and leaks and clean out any build-up in the chimney that could start a fire.
- Open flues before fireplaces are used.
- Use sturdy screens or glass doors to keep embers inside fireplaces.
- Install at least one smoke alarm on every level of your home and inside or near sleeping areas.
- Keep young children away from working wood stoves and heaters to avoid contact burn injuries.

Learn how to shut off water valves in case a pipe bursts.

Know ahead of time what you should do to help elderly or disabled friends, neighbors or employees.

Hire a contractor to check the structural ability of the roof to sustain unusually heavy weight from the accumulation of snow – or water, if drains on flat roofs do not work.

Prepare Your Car:

Check or have a mechanic check the following items on your car:

Antifreeze levels – ensure they are sufficient to avoid freezing.

Battery and ignition system – should be in top condition and battery terminals should be clean.

Brakes – check for wear and fluid levels.

Exhaust system – check for leaks and crimped pipes and repair or replace as necessary. Carbon monoxide is deadly and usually gives no warning.

Fuel and air filters – replace and keep water out of the system by using additives and maintaining a full tank of gas.

Heater and defroster – ensure they work properly.

Lights and flashing hazard lights – check for serviceability.

Oil – check for level and weight. Heavier oils congeal more at low temperatures and do not lubricate as well.

Thermostat – ensure it works properly.

Windshield wiper equipment – repair any problems and maintain proper washer fluid level.

Install good winter tires – Make sure the tires have adequate tread.

Maintain at least a half tank of gas during the winter season.

Place a winter emergency kit in each car that includes:

- a shovel
- windshield scraper and small broom
- flashlight
- battery powered radio
- extra batteries
- water
- snack food
- matches
- extra hats, socks and mittens
- first aid kit with pocket knife
- necessary medications
- blanket(s)
- tow chain or rope

road salt and sand
booster cables
emergency flares
fluorescent distress flag

****Carbon Monoxide (CO) Poisoning Precautions:** Carbon Monoxide (CO) is known as “the silent killer.” You cannot see it, smell it or taste it. CO claims the lives of nearly 300 people in their homes each year, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). CO is a deadly gas that is produced by fuel-burning heating equipment, such as furnaces, wood stoves, fireplaces, and kerosene heaters. Follow these guidelines to help keep your family safer:

- Install at least one CO alarm near sleeping areas.
- Have a trained professional inspect, clean and tune-up your home’s central heating system and repair leaks or other problems. Fireplaces and woodstoves should also be inspected each year and cleaned or repaired as needed.
- Keep gas appliances properly adjusted and serviced.
- Never use an oven or range to heat your home.
- Never use a gas or charcoal grill inside your home or in a closed garage.
- Portable electric generators must be used outside only. Never use them indoors, in a garage or in any confined area that can allow CO to collect. Follow usage directions closely.

Dress for the Weather:

Wear several layers of loose fitting, light-weight, warm clothing rather than one layer of heavy clothing. The outer garments should be tightly woven and water repellent.

Wear mittens which are warmer than gloves.

Wear a hat.

Cover your mouth with a scarf to protect your lungs.

During a Winter Storm:

If you are driving, only do so if it’s absolutely necessary. If you must drive, consider the following:

Travel in the day, don’t travel alone and keep others informed of your schedule.

Stay on main roads; avoid back road shortcuts.

Be “Ready-to-Go” or “Ready-to-Stay” if the Power Goes Out:

Stock up on batteries, flashlights, portable radios, canned foods, manual can openers, bottled water and blankets.

Use flashlights instead of candles to avoid a possible fire hazard.

If the temperature outside is below freezing and your home has no heat, run water at a trickle to help prevent pipes from freezing and bursting.

Store perishable food outside in the snow or in an unheated outside building if the power goes out.

Neighbors Helping Neighbors:

If someone you know is elderly or dependent on life-sustaining or health-related equipment, such as a ventilator, respirator or oxygen concentrator, you should make plans now to ensure their needs are met during severe winter weather and possible power outages.

- Help them stock a home disaster kit, including a flashlight and extra batteries, a battery-operated radio, bottled water, non-perishable foods, essential medicines and extra blankets or sleeping bags.
- Check on them after a storm or power outage. Register them as a special needs customer with their utility companies so they will become a priority customer. Notify others who could provide help such as neighbors, relatives, nearby friends, and local emergency responders, such as the fire department.
- Have a list of emergency numbers readily available.
- Have a standby generator or an alternative source of power available. Be aware of the safety rules for use.

Protect Your Pets:

Winter is a time we should pay close attention to the safety of our pets. Here are some tips:

If your pet goes outdoors, be aware of the temperature. Pets can get frostbite very easily on the ears, tail and paws.

When walking your dog, check the paws to make sure that ice is not building up between the toes and that salt from the road is not irritating the skin.

If your dog is a swimmer, keep it on a leash around open water or unstable ice. Hypothermia can set in quickly and the dog may be unable to get out of the water.

Before you start your car, you should honk the horn to make sure that a cat has not decided to nap in a warm spot under the hood of the vehicle, or underneath the vehicle.

If you have left your holiday decorations up after Christmas, keep ornaments out of reach of your pets. Remember that poinsettias, holly, mistletoe and other plants can be toxic if ingested.

Safe Sledding:

Winter is a fun time for children, but it can also be dangerous. Parents should be aware of some simple safety tips for their children when they go sledding or tobogganing:

Children should never use streets or roads for sledding unless they are blocked from traffic.

Children should sled only during daytime hours.

Do not sled on icy hills. Sledding hills should be only snow covered.

Avoid sledding over snow bumps or anything that may cause the sled to become airborne.

Never sled alone. An adult should always accompany small children.

Children should stay out of the paths of other sledders. In addition, if the slopes become busy, they should move off them quickly.

Parents, if you are sledding with your children, follow these rules yourselves.

Safe Skating:

If possible, skate at areas that have been approved and posted for ice-skating.

Never skate alone. Always have at least two people present.

Children should never be allowed to skate on a pond unsupervised.

Remember ice thickness is never consistent on lakes and ponds. Water currents, particularly around narrow spots, bridges, inlets and outlets are always suspect for thin ice.

Stay away from cracks, seams, pressure ridges, slushy areas and darker areas

that signify thinner ice.

Never skate after dark.

Hypothermia:

Prolonged exposure to cold temperatures can cause hypothermia, especially in children and the elderly. Watch for these symptoms:

Inability to concentrate

Poor coordination

Slurred speech

Drowsiness

Exhaustion

Uncontrollable shivering, followed by a sudden lack of shivering

If the person's body temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit, get emergency medical assistance immediately! Remove wet clothing, wrap the victim in warm blankets and give warm, non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated liquids until help arrives.

Frostbite:

People working or playing outdoors during the winter can develop frostbite and not even know it. There is no pain associated with the early stages of frostbite, so learn to watch for these danger signs:

First, the skin may feel numb and become flushed. Then it turns white or grayish-yellow. Frostbitten skin feels cold to the touch.

If frostbite is suspected, move the victim to a warm area. Cover the affected area with something warm and dry. Never rub it!

Then get to a doctor or hospital as quickly as possible.

Snow Blower Safety:

Do you have a snow blower? Did you know that most snow blower injuries happen because the operator did not read the operating instructions? So, read your owner's manual and follow these tips:

Never leave your snow blower running and unattended.

Make sure the discharge chute is not aimed at passing motorists or pedestrians.

Never put your hands into the discharge chute or augers to clear stuck snow and/or ice.

Never add fuel when the engine is running and hot.

Make sure you know how to turn the machine off quickly.

Some safety tips taken from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Manual and Home Safety Council Safety Guide.